

**“SNAKE-BITTEN”**  
**Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14-21**  
**March 26, 2006**  
**The Rev. Ryan Lambert**  
Copyright © 2006

Snake-bitten, deer-in-the-headlights, doe-eyed. All of these phrases suggest a state of panic, a certain amount of naiveté, or an inability to act. Honestly, that is how I felt when I first read our scripture lessons for today; because even though I am well-steeped in the less-than-faithful wanderings of the Israelites, and even though our gospel reading includes the football stadium sized proclamation of John 3:16, all I could see in our lessons were harsh images of rejection and rebuke. And that is just not how I want to think of our God.

Think about it. The United Church of Christ’s “Still Speaking Initiative” is based on celebrating God’s extravagant welcome. When I think about an extravagant welcome I think of Jesus telling the children “come unto me.” I think of God’s ever-present support for a nomadic band of followers who seek the freedom of the Promised Land. I think of Mary rubbing precious oils onto the feet of Jesus and using her hair to wipe off the excess. And, finally, I think of Jesus washing the feet of the disciples in a display of humility that still stuns me nearly every time I read of it. But this week, instead of proclaiming an extravagant welcome, what we find is the story of a fed-up God and a gospel reading that proclaims condemnation upon us in our moments of unbelief...great stuff, huh? Okay, so there it is, my grumpy rant against our lectionary readings. Welcome to this week’s sermon-writing universe!

As you might imagine from my rant, my first few attempts at writing a sermon didn’t go so well this week. It wasn’t like I hadn’t encountered the Numbers passage before. It wasn’t even that I blamed God for the reaction really. Honestly, if I were in God’s position and the Israelites were speaking ill of me again, if I heard them ranting over crazy things, acting like ungrateful people, I think I too might send some punishment their way. A few lightening strikes, a plague, some unwanted water maybe. But wait, that is me, the human guy who sometimes gets fed up with people and their attitude; and don’t we expect a little more from God than the grumpy retribution that I would hand out? Shouldn’t God be better than that? Rising up as we read our lessons is this question, “What do we expect from our God?”

Finally, thanks to some time studying and a few conversations (thanks Liz) I managed to step away from the “What an evil God” cliff and considered an alternative. There can be no doubt that the thought of God sending serpents into the midst of the Israelites is a horrible image. But there is also no doubt that the Israelites needed some sort of wake-up call from God. In some ways, the Israelites remind me of a classic Hollywood-style blackmailer, the one who just keeps trying to bleed someone dry based on the information they hold. For the Israelites the manna wasn’t enough, the quail didn’t suffice, seemingly nothing would answer the Israelites endless wants and desires. And so God acted, and confronted the Israelites for their bad behavior. And some of them died as a result. But there is more to the story, because just when it seems that we can’t think about it anymore, the rest of the story falls into place. Finally, the Israelites begin to get it, and see the error of the ways. Then once again God swoops in, instructing Moses to create

a bronze replica of the dangerous snake so that the afflicted may be healed. That replica snake becomes a marker of the times that the Israelites turned away from God; but it also marks the way toward healing and is an unmistakable reminder of the presence of God's grace.

At first glance this passage upsets our 21st Century sensibilities, and I wonder why? I think it probably has something to do with our sense of who God is, a sense that is based in our "learned and scholarship-based, warm-fuzzy-infused, everyone is welcome at the table" notions of God. I wonder if it is because we are so far removed from the dangerous nomadic days of the Israelites that we can no longer stomach the realities of biblical life. I wonder if the safety net of our comfortable homes, our comfortable pews, and safe "God loves us" theology hasn't made us immune to the sometimes harsh realities of God's response to the sins and failures of people over the generations. Perhaps it has something to do with fatigue, for I tire of the horrors of the evening news; and when I approach God in my time of need, I don't want to think about a God that might actually feel something about my failures. What we really want is for God to be there for us, on our terms...ready and waiting for us when we call! Perhaps that is why this week's lessons provoke us, because wishing away God's capacity to hold us accountable doesn't make it so. What those wishes do create, however, is a benign and neutered faith that does nothing more than say, "You're okay, I'm okay, God's Okay." Is that what we want? Is that a faith that has any integrity at all?

Once I got over my indignation about God's action toward the Israelites, other difficult questions about my expectations of God began to surface. I began to wonder anew about the morality of God and the fairness of the assumptions I place upon God. In this process, I could begin to imagine God's disdain for the requirements that we put around God and demand in order to follow. And I could hear God's response: Ryan, how dare you destroy my truth and power so that you can feel good! How dare you make me into nothing more than a neutral force, when I have freed your ancestors, loved you always, given you plenty, and surrounded you with the blessings of all creation! How dare you! In this week's text we see that the Israelites sinned and there was a consequence. Why is that so hard for us to deal with?

Perhaps hearing the words from Numbers today is hard to deal with because we have felt the sting that has come as a result of our own sins. Admit it: all too often we have felt the sting of a broken relationship, and known that it was our words or our actions that have been the catalyst for the carnage and brokenness. We hear about the serpents and we feel the stinging rebukes in our hearts caused by passing by yet another homeless person on our way to our comfortable and safe space. We recognized ourselves in the angry murmuring of the Israelites as we remembered the times we have chastised God for failing us. Our reaction is tinged with a healthy dose of our own guilt, for we all too completely recognize ourselves in sins of the Israelites. That, I think, is why those serpents leave us stunned and why we fear finding ourselves snake-bitten too. Sure, we only admit it quietly to ourselves, but we have felt the consequences of sin and it burns and stings even as we try to turn away from our failures.

Perhaps that is it; perhaps it is just all too true. Perhaps, also, we recognize that God could ask us to account for our deeds and our misdeeds, and we aren't entirely convinced that there will be a bronze serpent for us to look at so that we can find our salvation. We read that God had finally

reached a boiling point with the Israelites, but that the Lord also stood ready with a way out. Do we believe strongly enough in God's grace to know that our emergency exit to God even exists? When the Israelites realize they had turned their back on God, God was still there, ready to rescue them and welcome them back into the fold. Even when it seems that God has good reason to walk away, God remains and offers a grace-filled entrée to wholeness. I wonder then, why I had such a visceral reaction to our text? It seems that my comfort, my doubt, and my fears about finding a path to grace conspired to block my view as I read of the Israelites and the snakes.

Our gospel text, too, is one that has long frustrated and beguiled me. As I noted and you undoubtedly know, John 3:16 and its promise of everlasting life have long been seen everywhere and used in snapshot fashion to proclaim the promise of life and faith in Jesus. This passage is one of the great "born again" passages; and so (in typical UCC fashion) I rebel against it-as if we should or I could drum it out of our bible because of its over-simplified usage. But truly there is good stuff here, if only we refuse to get sucked into the pop-religion vortex and look instead for the depth of faith required to live up to the promise of this passage. There is no simpleton's gospel found here. In fact, one of my favorite theologians, Sarah Dylan Breuer writes this in response to our gospel reading: "Jesus is not a program for self-improvement; it's an invitation to a community. It's dislocation from a network of relationships that perpetuates injustice, death, and alienation so that we can be knit into a network of relationships that brings healing, reconciliation, and abundant life rooted in the eternal."

She is right. The Jesus that gathered disciples, taught and preached his way through the holy lands, and is proclaimed in placards on the 40 yard line of football games, cannot really be found in the self-help aisle of the local bookstore. Just as the Hebrew Bible text announces the sometimes harsh reality that we encounter in the aftermath of sin, this passage, too, announces that following Jesus isn't meant to be like a Club-Med vacation. Instead, the truth of the John 3:16 proclamation comes in the verses that follow it: that Jesus was and is a new light unto the world, and that there is a choice to be made about how to answer that light. The gospel writer announces that for some it was easier to remain imbedded in the darkness, and it is still true. It is still true that the sins that promote injustice, the sins that promote brokenness and division, and the sins that promote and allow alienation are oh so prevalent. But the promise of living in the aftermath of the life and ministry of Jesus, of living always connected to the vision that God proclaims, means that we must live a life that makes healing and reconciliation the reality for our world. John 3:16 has been turned into sickly-sweet theological babble, but at its roots is something pure and unimaginably good: a dedication to a new life, to a new creation where desolation is wiped out and in its place a new holy place is created, wherever we might be. This holy place isn't possible, however, unless we confront the true reality of following Jesus. Too often I think we run kicking and screaming away from salvation because the language is too risky, too painful, too-dare I say it-Christian. Following Jesus is hard, messy stuff that includes being held accountable for our actions. Somewhere along the line some of us, I think, have slipped into believing that the language of sin, the language of consequences, the language of God holding us accountable, and, yes, the even the language of grace, has given us license to sit with our feet up and relax.

The truth is that being a Christian is no easier or harder today than it ever has been. There might

be more distractions, there might be more options, there might be more cushy couches to relax upon, but the danger of finding ourselves snake-bitten and paralyzed remains just as possible today as ever. In this season of Lent, as the darkness of Good Friday and the promise of Easter move ever-closer, our scriptures are calling us toward a renewed awareness of the challenge of faithful living. “Dumbing down” our faith and proclaiming a gospel of rest and relaxation does nothing but shelter us from the real work that God has set before us. John’s gospel proclaims that the light of the world has come; and we, in turn, are being called out of the shadows, out of our doubts, and into the fullness of being. What remains for us is this question: Do we have the courage to honestly and fully stand and proclaim that as living, breathing, falling, and trying-again people, we believe in the mystery and power of God’s redeeming grace? It is that simple, and it is that hard, too.